WATERTOWN, N.Y.
TIMES JUN 18 1973
E - 43,427

Secret Papers

The fact that the United States has been fighting wars of one kind or another for the last 20 years, after only five years of peace beginning in 1945, the end of World War II, has created a federal paranoia toward security secrets. The publisher of the New York Times has commented, "Governments often stamp Secret on too many things because they don't want people to find out things that are embarrassing to them. . . . there are tons of documents even from World War II, which has been over 25 years now, that are still classified Secret, and I think it is a wonderful way if you have got an egg on your face to prevent anyone from knowing it; stamp it Secret and put it away."

Generally speaking, the government classification system for preventing the circulation of information involves degrees of protection. The highest is Top Secret, followed by Secret, Confidential, and the lowest is some form of Restricted. These are the broad categories, but there may be subdivisions within each level, depending upon the frequency of changes as recommended by security specialists. In no instance have there been recommendations for fewer classifications. Rather, the investigators tend to push for more restraints.

Wars increase the rubber stamping of papers. When one war follows another, the declassifiers never catch up to the classifiers. Psychologically, declassifying does not have the same effect on the ego as classifying does, so naturally, in the ranks of the Defense establishment there are more officers raising the security than there are who are reducing security.

The extreme lengths to which Defense will go is exemplified by the many newspaper clippings that are filed away in the Pentagon library, each having been duly stamped on the top and the bottom as Confidential or Secret, and possibly Top Secret. Presumably the world has read the news story, but the fact that the Defense establishment is interested in the story makes it eligible to become a military secret.

A security system must exist for military documents such as the plans for defending the nation against attack or plans for defending some other nation from attack. The next question concerns the degree of secrecy. How many officers should be permitted access to these plans? Obviously, the greater degree of secrecy, Top Secret, the fewer are those who have access. Thus the system, by classifying to different degrees, is supposed to assure a distribution that involves those who are concerned, but no one else. The principal "No one else" should be the enemy, but too frequently the "no one else" is, as Mr. Sulzberger says, the persons who might discover "You have got egg on your face."

A military tank that is developed at great cost to the nation may be classified as a secret weapon until it goes on the battlefield. It may also be classified as a secret weapon when it is a failure, in the hopes that neither the enemy nor the taxpayer will learn of the failure.

Several years ago an officer came to Watertown in a naval airplane to attend a reserve officers' convention. The airplane was damaged in landing, and the Navy sought to prevent an account of the accident on the grounds that military security would be violated. The embargo failed, but provided a classic example of how a military service tries to invoke secrecy as a coverup for failure.

American citizens support the general idea of security and believe that military secrecy is essential to the degree that it prevents the nation's enemies from threatening our destruction. However, these citizens understand that the secrecy involves the present and not the past. What happened in World War II is hardly a secret that has anything to do with the defense of the nation today. They disagree with thoughts as expressed by General Maxwell Taylor, the former ambassador to South Vietnam, who has said, "A citizen should know those things he needs to know to be a good citizen and discharge his functions, not to get in on secrets which simply damage his government and indirectly damage the citizen himself." Few Americans agree that Big Brother should watch over us. That is what General Taylor seems to believe.

Several years ago, when Allen W. Dulles was head of the C.I.A., he arrived at a security conference at Quantico, Virginia, carrying his brief case. Questioning newspapermen inquired what he had within the case. He opened it up for them to see, and there was the New York Times. Were he alive today and if the inquiry were the same, the case would have been empty or his secrets would be showing.